

CRM at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park

A Concluding Perspective

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, is best known as the site of John Brown's October 1859 raid, which helped propel a dividing nation into Civil War in April 1861. Future Confederate leaders Col. Robert E. Lee and Capt. J.E.B. Stuart came to Harpers Ferry when their loyalties were to the United States Army. During the war, both Union and Confederate armies fought for control of Harpers Ferry because they needed the products of its industries and control of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O). Harpers Ferry has far more significance, though, and that is the challenge for the National Park Service (NPS) at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park (Harpers Ferry NHP). Historians of technology know that Brown chose Harpers Ferry because its federal arsenal might provide weapons for his crusade against slavery. Their interests focus on the production of those weapons and the town's water-powered industries. Industrial archeologists love the ruins of those industries and know Harpers Ferry as a place where the B&O, America's first trunk line, and the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Canal Company competed for access to the narrow strip of land along the Potomac in Maryland in their quest to link the trans-Allegheny west to the eastern seaboard. The B&O also crossed the river here on a rare Bollman truss bridge which was blown up during the Civil War and later rebuilt, only to be destroyed in the 1936 flood.

Preservationists trace the history of the peripatetic brick engine house where the U.S. Army captured John Brown, a building that went to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and has sat in several locations in the Harpers Ferry area. They also see Harpers Ferry NHP as a laboratory for the evolving philosophies of preserving, restoring, or reconstructing 19th-century buildings discussed in the article by park architect Peter Dessauer.

For African Americans, Harpers Ferry holds special meaning. In 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau established Storer College, a predominantly

African-American institution that closed in 1955 as West Virginia integrated its colleges and universities after the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois visited Harpers Ferry and the Niagara Movement met there in 1906. A few years later, the Niagara Movement would give rise to the NAACP. As a side bar in the John Brown saga, Du Bois returned to Harpers Ferry in 1932 to oppose the Heyward Shepherd Monument erected the previous year by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Shepherd was a free black man and the first casualty of Brown's raid. Interest in the park's 1995 stance to display the history surrounding Shepherd's death in its entirety, including the monument and Du Bois' reaction to the monument, demonstrates the challenge and the difficulties of communicating public history. Presenting topics such as John Brown's raid, slavery, and the Civil War to 500,000 visitors annually has helped the park gain valuable experience in conveying controversial subjects in an objective and sensitive manner. This allows visitors to draw their own conclusions about history that happened in Harpers Ferry.

Today, the town of Harpers Ferry is a destination in itself. West Virginia's low property taxes, affordable housing, and convenience to metropolitan Washington, DC, have turned the town into a commuter suburb whose residents zealously protect the town through an active historic landmarks commission. Tourists enjoy visiting the park as well as fishing on the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers or hiking and biking along the C&O Canal, and walking the Appalachian Trail. Tourist-oriented shops attract people who just want to escape and enjoy the spectacular scenery, now free from the grime, noise, smoke, and disease that accompanied 19th-century industrial towns located in valleys.

All these competing interests may not be unique for a national park, but it is important to remember that they take place primarily within the few blocks that make up the Lower Town. While the National Park Service owns far more

acreage, much of it is steeply wooded hillsides that are documented to record the historic scene at Harpers Ferry through various archeological and cultural landscape reports (CLRs).

Because of this rich history of cultural resources, the NPS has devoted an issue of *CRM* to Harpers Ferry NHP. I agreed to contribute because Harpers Ferry offers an interesting case study of the variety of resource management issues that all parks face. In 1985, I was one of the non-NPS people at a CRM workshop held at the Mather Training Center. In 1988–89, I was a member of the National Parks and Conservation Association's Commission on Research and Resource Management Policy for the national park system. Two of our basic tenets were that all parks have both natural and cultural resources and that resource management had to take place in an ecosystem context. It would be easy to say that cultural resources clearly dominate at Harpers Ferry NHP, but the recurrent flooding along the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers proves that the forces of nature can easily destroy what people build, particularly because there is no flood control on the vast drainage area of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

Several major ideas emerge from these articles that seem to guide resource management at Harpers Ferry NHP, specifically, interdisciplinary cooperation, planning, and partnerships. Interdisciplinary efforts are prominent in several articles, particularly in the development of CLRs and plans for museum exhibits. NPS personnel with a wide variety of expertise must cooperate to manage the multiple cultural resources at Harpers Ferry, ranging from such rare items as John Brown's family Bible to newspapers and court records, 19th-century buildings, artifacts from the site of an armory worker's home, and the ruins on Virginus Island. Not mentioned here, but still important, are the artifacts that document prehistoric inhabitants of this valley. Much time, energy, and money has gone into planning to protect these resources.

Some Harpers Ferry NHP partners are other NPS offices such as Mather Training Center, the Denver Service Center, and the Williamsport Preservation Training Center. Although not stressed in this issue, Harpers Ferry NHP also has a strong cooperative bond with the adjacent C&O Canal National Historical Park. This relationship takes a variety of forms: the exchange of interpreters between the two parks; mutual assistance with law enforcement, rescue, and resource protection matters; the participation of both parks in funding the highly successful PARTNERS program focusing on creation of a curriculum for

teacher use of the parks as classrooms; and the exchange of staff and equipment to deal with the extensive flood damage inflicted upon both parks in January of 1996. Indeed, the two parks are quite literally connected by a bridge span named in memory of former Maryland Congressman Goodlowe E. Byron. Constructed as a cantilevered pedestrian walkway attached to an existing railroad bridge, this foot bridge links the two parks across the Potomac at Harpers Ferry. This bridge actually adds a third park to the partnership because it is also a designated portion of the Appalachian Trail that stretches 2,200 miles from Maine to Georgia.

The articles also reference multiple non-NPS partners, including the University of Maryland, the West Virginia University Institute for the History of Technology and Industrial Archaeology, architectural and engineering firms, and state historic preservation offices. Many of these partnerships take place for specific projects. This fact speaks to the importance of working closely with partners to fully inform them of the manner in which their specific work fits into a broader plan for Harpers Ferry NHP.

Perhaps the most important partner is the U.S. Congress. Harpers Ferry NHP was one of the two sites that the new Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments reviewed at its first meeting in February 1936. The board considered identifying sites that represented a set of themes of American history, and former NPS historian Veme Chatelain suggested Harpers Ferry to represent the theme of the coming of the Civil War.¹ The NPS was responding to the requests of Rep. Jennings Randolph (D-WV), who, with Storer College President Henry T. McDonald, looked to the idea of a park after a flood damaged the town.² Congress authorized Harpers Ferry National Monument in 1944 and it became a national historical park in 1963.

Following Randolph's early interests in Harpers Ferry NHP, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) for more than 30 years has helped fund the restoration of the park—West Virginia's best-known landmark—including those years he served as Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Senator Byrd has shown a keen interest in American history, personally demonstrated by his authorship of a history of the United States Senate. In legislative terms, his interest in preserving history has been expressed nationally in support of National Park Service programs and locally through his interest in advancing the restoration of Harpers Ferry NHP. Given his recognized leadership role in the U.S. Senate, he has

Jefferson Rock and the Shenandoah River, 1890–1895. Courtesy Harpers Ferry NHP.



been an invaluable ally in the development and restoration of Harpers Ferry as a unit of the national park system.

Harpers Ferry NHP also cooperates with the town's local government and its year-round residents. NPS signs mark the entrances to the park, but how many visitors think the John Brown Wax Museum may be part of Harpers Ferry NHP, or that the NPS may have approved the Coca-Cola machine "camouflaged" by a wooden fence? The process of effectively blending what is in the park with what is outside it is shared with the town's historic landmarks commission and the local residents who work cooperatively with the park to preserve the town's historic character. This effort to achieve aesthetic harmony between the park and the surrounding area is one of the many issues that Harpers Ferry NHP—like all national parks—faces in its ongoing effort to maintain a strong cooperative partnership with the local community.

While these articles provide fascinating case studies, they also raise some questions. Harpers Ferry NHP has sought funding for a General Management Plan (GMP), but has yet to be selected from the servicewide list of parks requesting the completion of such plans. In the absence of a GMP, the 1980 Development Concept Plan and the 1987 Resource Management Plan guide park development. Until such time as the park completes a GMP, these plans provide the maximum possible coordination among the planners and the implementation of their plans. However, a GMP—or some other

comprehensive, park-wide plan—would provide the park with a useful tool to supplement current efforts to manage a collection of cultural resources that are among the most diverse in the national park system.

Harpers Ferry NHP also has to constantly deal with the fact that, during the critical early years of park development, the interpretive focus was John Brown's raid. Because the National Park Service was then focusing on only a moment in time, it demolished post-Civil War buildings that would now be restored to help interpret the story of the development of the 19th-century town and reflect the social history themes historians have discussed for the past 30 years. That early focus on the raid meant that Harpers Ferry NHP did not adequately interpret resources like the Storer College buildings located a steep walk up from Lower Town, so that too few visitors venture there. Proposed restoration projects in the Camp Hill section of the park offer hope that the former campus of Storer College will someday become a larger part of the Harpers Ferry visitors' experience.

Other threatened resources are beyond the control of Harpers Ferry NHP. For example, in June of 1995 the Roman Catholic diocese closed the historic St. Peter's Church in Harpers Ferry, a wonderful cool respite for visitors and an excellent example of 19th-century architecture. Furthermore, the park must struggle with the protection of an area outside the park known as School House Ridge. This area played a critical role in Stonewall Jackson's successful effort to

outflank federal forces vainly attempting to defend Harpers Ferry in 1862. Despite this undeniable historical significance, this area is threatened by a variety of development activities. The park responds to those threats by partnering with a variety of groups concerned about the preservation of Civil War battlefields and also by leading tours and educational programs which help to keep the historical significance of School House Ridge in the public eye.

Also adjacent to the park is the Murphy Farm. After the conclusion of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Alexander Murphy saved the John Brown Fort from possible demolition when he purchased it from the exposition organizers and moved it to his farm just outside Harpers Ferry. In 1906, the fort figured prominently in the second Niagara Conference in Harpers Ferry when W.E.B. Du Bois led a group to the farm to see the building where John Brown and his men sought refuge after launching their insurrection against the institution of slavery. The park continues to cooperate with the descendants of Alexander Murphy to preserve this important site that is adjacent to the park boundary, but still intimately connected with the Harpers Ferry story.

Harpers Ferry NHP, and all parks, need to continue to educate their visitors about the fragility of these resources, the planning necessary for their protection, and the need for public

support to fund that study and protection. This theme may be as important as the official interpretive themes of environment, transportation, industry, John Brown, the Civil War, and African-American history.

But Harpers Ferry is more than the result of careful planning. It is a magical place, as Superintendent Donald W. Campbell points out, and, through the "magic" of the internet, you can visit Harpers Ferry NHP through the park's superb home page on the World Wide Web. Computer graphics, though, cannot capture the steepness of the hills on a hot humid day, the rush of the water at flood time, or the echo of a gun shot through the valley. For that, you'll have to visit Harpers Ferry in person and be glad that Harpers Ferry NHP, like most historic sites, makes no attempt to recreate all aspects of a 19th-century industrial town!

Notes

- ¹ Charles B. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*, vol. 1 (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 596-597.
- ² *Ibid.*, 664-668.

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